

Worker's Guide to Hazardous Chemicals

Understanding the Right-to-Know Law



Department of
**LABOR AND
INDUSTRIES**



NOTE: This brochure is meant to help employees understand their rights under Washington's chemical hazard communication standard. Giving this brochure to employees does not adequately fulfill an employer's legal obligation to provide information and training.

The Department of Labor and Industries can help employers develop a Chemical Hazard Communication program that meets the requirements of the Right-to-Know law. Employers can contact L&I for assistance. Telephone numbers are listed at the back of this brochure.

This document is available in alternative formats to accommodate persons with disabilities. For assistance, call 1-800-547-8367. TDD users please call (360) 902-5797. Labor and Industries is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

What is the Worker Right-to-Know law?

The Worker Right-to-Know (Chemical Hazard Communication) law gives you the right to be told about hazardous chemicals used in your work area.

Under the chemical hazard communication rule, manufacturers of hazardous chemicals used in your workplace must tell your employer about the nature and effects of those chemicals. In turn, your employer must tell you about them and train you in their proper use. The law is designed to help you protect your health.

The Washington State Legislature passed the Worker Right-to-Know Law in 1984 as part of the Worker and Community Right-to-Know Act (Chapter 49.70, Revised Code of Washington). The Department of Ecology is responsible for the Community Right-to-Know portion of the law, which helps citizens learn about hazardous chemicals in their neighborhoods.

For more information about Community Right-to-Know, call the Department of Ecology toll free at 1-800-633-7585.

The Department of Labor and Industries is responsible for the chemical hazard communication rule, which tells employers what they need to do to comply with Worker Right-to-Know law.

The rule says you must be told the following things about hazardous chemicals in your work area:

- What chemicals are used.
- Where they are kept.
- How they might harm you.
- How to tell when chemicals have been spilled or released.
- What your employer is doing to protect you from being exposed to chemicals.
- Where to find written information about the chemicals and about your employer's program for protecting you.
- What to do in case of an emergency.
- How to safely use hazardous chemicals as part of your job.

If you want to see the rule, go to the L&I web site at www.LNI.wa.gov and click on Safety, then Safety Rules. You may get a paper copy from a local L&I office. Telephone numbers are listed at the back of this brochure.

What is a hazardous chemical?

A hazardous chemical is any chemical or mixture of chemicals that can hurt you physically or cause health problems. Most industrial chemicals are hazardous.

Never assume a chemical is safe. If you aren't sure how to use a certain chemical, ask your employer for help.

By law, you have the right to learn about chemicals you work with, and you have the right to protect yourself against their dangers. You must be **told** about hazardous chemicals in your work area, and you must be **trained** on those chemicals you use and those to which you might be exposed.

Working with chemicals

The chance you will be affected by a hazardous chemical depends on (1) the chemical itself, (2) what precautions your employer has instituted, (3) the way your specific job is performed and (4) your understanding of the hazards and ways to protect yourself. The risk of working with a hazardous chemical can be reduced in five ways:

- Being aware of the hazards
- Controlling the work area
- Using personal protective equipment
- Practicing safe work habits
- Using common sense

For example, suppose you work with a solvent. Inhaling the solvent's vapors and letting it contact your skin are both hazardous. Here are some ways you could be protected from the solvent:

1. Awareness:

- Know the hazards.
- Read the solvent label.
- Understand how to protect yourself.

2. Controlling the work area:

- Use ventilation.
- Isolate the work area so that people not working with the solvent avoid exposure.

3. Personal protective equipment:

- Wear a proper respirator to keep vapors from your lungs.
- Use gloves that prevent the solvent from contacting your skin.

4. Work practices:

- Avoid breathing the vapors.
- Avoid skin contact.
- Use the solvent only in well-ventilated areas.

5. Common sense:

- Be aware of your work environment.
- Take a moment to think about what you're doing.
- Make sure you've been trained before you begin using the chemicals.

Note: By law, your employer must give you the training and equipment needed to do your job safely. You provide the awareness and common sense that will help you avoid danger.

Finding out more about a chemical

There are three main sources of information about the chemicals in your workplace — the *label* on the chemical container, the *material safety data sheets* prepared for that chemical and your employer's *written hazard communication program*.

The label on the container

Read the label. The product label is your first source of hazard information. **It should tell you what could happen to someone who is exposed to the chemical.** Many labels also will explain how to safely handle the chemical.

To protect your health, it is very important to read all chemical labels and follow the directions.

If the label only has vague warnings such as “caution” or “danger,” bring it to your employer’s attention. It may not meet the requirements of the law.

Your employer may keep the original manufacturer’s label on the chemical. Some employers develop their own labeling system. Your employer may use color codes or numbers to help you decide how to work with each chemical. All employees working with chemicals must be able to understand and use the system.

Chemical containers must be labeled

The only exception is a portable container. No label is needed if the container is (1) filled from a labeled container, (2) used **only** by the employee filling the container, (3) intended for immediate use, and (4) properly cleaned and disposed of after use.

All labels must be in English and easy to read. Tell your supervisor if you find containers with labels that are torn or smudged so you cannot read them.

The Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS)

Look up the MSDS. An MSDS is a technical bulletin that tells you about each chemical in your workplace. **Your employer is required to keep an MSDS on each chemical used in your workplace and let you see it at any time.**

(Laboratories do not have to obtain an MSDS for each chemical, but any that are received must be kept and made available to employees at all times.)

Before working with a chemical, you should look at the MSDS. That way, you'll know how to find additional information in an emergency.

An MSDS can be in any format, but it must contain the following information:

- What the chemical is called (as shown on the label).
- Name, address and phone number for hazard and emergency information.
- The date the MSDS was prepared.
- Chemical and common names of hazardous ingredients in the chemical, unless it's a trade secret.
- Limits on the amount of the chemical to which you may safely be exposed.
- Physical and chemical characteristics, such as the temperature at which the chemical boils, catches fire or vaporizes.
- Physical hazards, such as the chance the chemical will catch fire, explode or react with other chemicals.
- How the chemical might enter your body: whether you might accidentally breathe it, ingest it or absorb it through your skin.
- Health hazards: how to recognize if the chemical has entered your body (for example: dizziness, skin irritation, shortness of breath), what might happen to you (for example: rash, lung damage, cancer) and how the chemical might make any existing medical problems worse.

-
- Carcinogen identification: whether a governmental agency has found that the chemical might cause cancer.
 - Emergency and first-aid procedures.
 - Ways to safely handle and use the product.
 - Exposure controls that can keep you from coming into contact with the product, such as respirators, ventilation hoods or a separate room for those working with the product.

Written hazard communication program

You have a right to review your employer's written hazard communication program. It should contain a list of all hazardous substances found in your workplace, explain who is responsible for the program and tell where the MSDS is located.

Common questions about Worker Right to Know

Q. Do I have to sign a training record saying I've been informed and trained about the chemicals in my workplace?

A. The law doesn't say you have to sign a training record, but your employer may require you to sign his or her records. Do not sign the record if you were not trained or did not understand the training.

Q. Should I be trained on every hazardous chemical used in my company?

A. No. You only have to be trained on chemicals in your work area that you might contact while doing your job or in an emergency.

Q. Do I need training every time a new product or procedure is used?

A. You need training whenever a new hazard is introduced. Training is not needed if new products or procedures do not create a hazard.

Q. Is a product safe if it has no warning label or MSDS?

A. Not always. If you aren't sure whether a product is hazardous, ask your supervisor to find out. It is your employer's responsibility to find out what hazardous substances are in your work place and to let you know.

Q. I work at a construction site, and we move around a lot. Does my employer still have to make the MSDS available to me?

A. Yes. MSDS must be available to you where you work, and you must be able to access them during the work shift. Your employer must tell you where they are kept or how you can ask for them. (MSDS may be kept in a central location at the primary workplace facility and accessed by means such as voice communications or laptop computer.)

Q. Do retail products come under the hazard communication rules?

A. Yes, if there are hazard warnings on the label and you are exposed to more of the product than the general public would be. For example, someone refinishing furniture at home might use one can of paint thinner a month. But someone refinishing furniture at work could use one can a day. That worker's exposure is higher than normal, so the hazard communication rules would apply.

Q. If my employer tests me to see whether I am exposed to hazardous chemicals, am I allowed to see the results?

A. Yes. You or your representative have the right to see any medical or exposure records kept by your employer within 15 days of your request.

Q. What can I do if my employer doesn't have a hazard communication program and has not trained me about chemical hazards in my workplace?

A. First, tell your employer about your concerns. Suggest he or she contact the Department of Labor and Industries for help. Labor and Industries helps employers design safety and health programs, including hazard communication programs, at no charge.

Worker Right-to-Know is the law. It is meant to protect you while you work. If your employer does not follow the hazard communication rules, you have the right to file a complaint about violation of safety and health regulations. Call Labor and Industries to find out how to file a complaint. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by law.

Local L&I offices

Region 1 — Northwest Washington

Bellingham	360-647-7300
Everett	425-290-1300
Mount Vernon	360-416-3000

Region 2 — King County

Bellevue	425-990-1400
Seattle	206-515-2800
Tukwila	206-835-1000

Region 3 — Pierce County/Peninsula

Bremerton	360-415-4000
Port Angeles	360-417-2700
Tacoma	253-596-3800

Region 4 — Southwest Washington

Aberdeen	360-533-8200
Longview	360-575-6900
Tumwater	360-902-5799
Vancouver	360-896-2300

Region 5 — Central Washington

East Wenatchee	509-886-6500
Kennewick	509-735-0100
Moses Lake	509-764-6900
Yakima	509-454-3700

Region 6 — Eastern Washington

Colville	509-684-7417
Pullman	509-334-5296
Spokane	509-324-2600

L&I web site

www.LNI.wa.gov



Checklist: How to protect yourself

- ☐ **Use only properly labeled containers.**
- ☐ **Read the entire container label.**
- ☐ **Know where the Material Safety Data Sheets are kept.**
- ☐ **Report *every* spill, leak and accident.**
- ☐ **Understand what to do in case of an emergency.**
- ☐ **Use protective equipment when needed.**
- ☐ **Recognize dangerous situations.**
- ☐ **Follow instructions.**

